THE HEAT AND THE LIGHT:
TOWARDS A REASSESSMENT OF THE CONTRIBUTION
OF H. MARSHALL MCLUHAN

Liss Jeffrey
McGill University


In death, McLuhan has become a kind of bogeyman of technological determinism, yet many of his ideas live on in the popular imagination, and a minority of serious scholars continue to be inspired by his work. To explain this paradox, the author advances six interpretive hypotheses which run counter to the current orthodox dismissal of McLuhan.

How will future cultural and intellectual historians regard the contribution of H. Marshall McLuhan (1911-1980), professor of English literature at the University of Toronto, and former celebrity media scholar? Will he continue to be viewed as a controversial figure, a marginal man from a marginal country who got it wrong, as current orthodoxy has it? Will he be assessed as an icon of the 1960’s who contributed to a substantial shift in the ways ordinary people think about media? Or will his significance be seen to lie in his role as catalyst in the historical shaping of the modern “interdiscipline” of communications (Littlejohn 1979; Robinson 1987)? No definitive answer is yet possible. There are, however, early signs that a reassessment of McLuhan may be under way (Heyer 1988; Journal of Communication 1981 "The living McLuhan"; Czitrom 1982). Rich material for any such effort is to be found in the voluminous published corpus of McLuhan, the private papers deposited with the National Archives of Canada, from which a collection of letters has been published (1987), and oral history retrievable from the many colleagues and acquaintances willing to share their personal knowledge.
It is the purpose of this essay to contribute to the reassessment of McLuhan by presenting a series of basic interpretive hypotheses derived from these documentary sources. Methodologically, the essay is framed within recent approaches to cultural/intellectual history which are concerned with the sociology, and disciplinary organization of knowledge (Jones 1983; Graham, Lepenies, Weingart eds. 1983). Profoundly influenced by Thomas Kuhn's study of patterns of change and continuity in authoritative scientific knowledge in *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, (Kuhn 1962;1970; Jones 1983), these approaches build from biographical interpretation, while avoiding the "great man" approach which characterized earlier work in the history of ideas by attending to the institutional context in which intellectual work is practiced. Scholarship is seen to be a social activity, conducted by individual members of a community of practitioners who operate within a variety of institutional constraints and opportunities. Lepenies summarizes Quentin Skinner on the task of this form of history:...."the history of disciplines tries to recover intentions, to reconstruct conventions and to restore contexts" (in Rorty, Schneewind, and Skinner 1984, 155). For the cultural and intellectual historian, academic reputation, "contribution" or "significance" is an artefact, socially constructed (Berger and Luckman) by a community of practitioners (Kuhn 1962; Tiriyakian 1979; Jones 1983) and a proper object of historical study.

This essay is modest in aim in that it argues for a reassessment and offers the interpretive hypotheses towards this projected reassessment of McLuhan. No pretense is made to exhaustive coverage, rather the objective is to use the interpretive hypotheses to open up lines of research. In particular, the full contribution of the institutional context, centred on the University of Toronto, in the shaping of McLuhan's work, is addressed chiefly in programmatic terms in this essay. This results from a decision to concentrate first on the fresh biographical basis for the recovery of McLuhan's intentions to be found in the Archives material. The interpretive hypotheses represent an attempt to organize thematically the vast amounts of public and private text produced by McLuhan within the context of his biography and career. Although the hypotheses take initial shape as descriptive themes, clearly they have an evaluative dimension. Their use in reassessment lies in their function as conceptual tools with which to explore the paradox of McLuhan's significance, a paradox which will be elaborated in the next section.

To anticipate the reassessment, McLuhan is here accorded a role as catalyst in the emergent "interdiscipline" of communications, which following Littlejohn is defined as a disciplinary focus for "scholars identifying with various disciplines who share a common interest in the theme of communication" (in Robinson 1987). He is further claimed as a foundational figure, along with Harold Innis, for the subfield of communications/history (Carey 1967; Heyer 1988). The final task to be briefly undertaken just prior to conclusion, will be to position this essay's stance
within the universe of posthumous critical discourse among Canadian scholars regarding McLuhan (Fekete 1982; Kroker 1984; Heyer 1988). This reassessment will also be distinguished from the recent variety of dominant U.S. orthodoxy (Czitrom 1982).

Paradox

In death, McLuhan seems to have become a kind of bogeyman of technological determinism. Where once he reigned master of the one line pun, now he is often introduced and dismissed in one or two lines. His entire oeuvre may be cited and dismissed under the quasi-religious designation "the McLuhanites", in criticism evocative of some virulent strain of Ludditism. For example, the normally careful U.S. literary critic Fredric Jameson cannot spell McLuhan's name correctly, as in this representative passage from *The Political Unconscious*: "Its continuing influence may be observed, for instance, in that technological determinism of which MacLuhanism [sic] remains the most interesting contemporary expression." (1981,25). At the same time, and however much his role and his place in the history of ideas may be denigrated, much of McLuhan's once startlingly fresh observation is now part of popular parlance, at least at the level of conceptual phrase: "the medium is the message", "the global village". In this sense his influence continues, and metaphorically speaking his contribution—about which more in a moment—circulates securely in the cultural bloodstream.

More recently, there is evidence that McLuhan's work has become less marginal, and may have found a place in the ancestry of certain of the varied traditions of ongoing communications research. Heyer has noted that scholars including Stephen Kern, Walter Ong, and Neil Postman (to name a few, not a technological determinist among them) have found some positive significance for the research enterprise of communications in McLuhan's work (Heyer 1988). Others, such as Joshua Meyrowitz, who links the communications work of two Canadians, Goffman and McLuhan, and Littlejohn (in speech and rhetoric studies) have also found inspiration in McLuhan.

Despite the diverse nature of their research projects these scholars share three central points in common, a convergence which elucidates McLuhan's enduring contribution. First, all share respect for history in the broad sense of recognizing a necessity to take a macroscopic view in order to discern changes and continuities in the problematic of what Heyer calls communications/history, and which I believe can be thematized as the intersection of culture and technology in social organization. This can be taken as the major contribution of *Gutenberg Galaxy*. Second, and related, all see merit in study of developments in technology, which is construed as a human artefact which is internal to culture. In an Innisian definition drawn from Langdon Winner, "The things we call "technologies" are ways of building order in our world." (1980, 127). Characteristically, these scholars
incorporate into the definition the so-called technologies of the intellect, such as literacy. Specifics vary, but all would view the shift in human cultural and cognitive organization from orality to literacy as fundamental to comprehension of historical changes in human social organization. This can be taken as one of the major contributions of *Understanding Media*, in addition to *Gutenberg Galaxy*. The most fitting research extension for McLuhan is probably Elizabeth Eisenstein’s massive work on the history of the impact of the printing press. Heyer has noted, however, that Eisenstein tried to stay out of McLuhan’s shadow because of the opprobrium she feared might attach to her work. The boldness and the controversy of McLuhan lay in the fact that he was prepared to apply the insights gained in study of the past in order to comprehend present and future. The third common focus lies in the shared view of McLuhan as a catalyst offering inspiration, a fertile and provocative if unsystematic thinker who made an indelible contribution to the commencement of communications as an interdisciplinary research enterprise. From his first book, *Mechanical Bride* (1951), McLuhan evinced a highly original response to mass communication which took popular culture as an object of serious study. Because the charge has been so often and continues to be made, it bears repeating that of those discussed above who acknowledge his work as a pathbreaker in communications, no one deifies McLuhan nor worships at the shrine of technological determinism.

To restate the paradox as this essay’s explanandum: McLuhan’s influence persists in general cultural terms and his contribution is recognized in the work of a minority of serious communications scholars; yet simultaneously his academic reputation is in partial eclipse. Many of his ideas have outlived him, despite the violent reaction of many members of the academic community against McLuhan’s work, the mechanisms of which may be discerned in the forms of trivialization discussed above. There is a paradox here, in the Greek sense of beyond the orthodox, beyond what is commonly thought. This paradox requires historical explanation.

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**FIGURE 1**

The Paradox of Marshall McLuhan’s Contribution:
Interpretive Hypotheses

I. Identity and Orientation. (Recovering intentions)
   1. Superior Outsider.
   2. Self-created individual.

II. Intellectual Production. (Recovering conventions)
   4. Educator/catalyst.

III. Institutional Context. (Disciplinary placement)
   5. Literature professor turned interdisciplinary culture critic.
   6. Contributor to emergence of communications as interdiscipline.
The history of a life's work is not nearly so schematic as Figure 1 might lead us to expect. The narrative in this section begins synoptically with the appearance in 1962 of McLuhan's second book, *Gutenberg Galaxy*, an apt point of departure for any reassessment. A comparative technique is found useful to begin, but this will immediately give way to discussion organized under the heads of the interpretive hypotheses.

Throughout, it is intended to recover some of the intentions of McLuhan (Jones 1983; Lepenies 1983). All major evidence indicates that as an adult McLuhan saw himself as a pattern watcher ("Playboy interview" 1969); this self-perception properly informs the entire interpretation. In postwar intellectual history, the historian of science Thomas Kuhn would doubtless be considered one of North America's preeminent and influential pattern watchers. Allow me to suggest that there is a resonance between aspects of the work of these two academics, and the timing of that work. At about the same time Kuhn and McLuhan each precipitated a rupture in the conventional discussion of rationality and interpretation, knowledge communities and their instruments. Despite their differences, each triggered a form of thought revolution which had repercussions which continue up to the present.

In 1962, when Thomas Kuhn's second book *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* first appeared, he wrote, in the chapter entitled "Revolutions as changes in worldview":

Examining the record of past research from the vantage of contemporary historiography, the historian of science may be tempted to exclaim that when paradigms change, the world itself changes with them. Led by a new paradigm, scientists adopt new instruments and look in new places. Even more important, during revolutions scientists see new and different things when looking with familiar instruments in places they have looked before. It is rather as if the professional community had been suddenly transported to another planet where familiar objects are seen in a different light and are joined by unfamiliar ones as well. ... we may want to say that after a revolution scientists are responding to a different world [Kuhn 1970, 111].

That same year, Marshall McLuhan also published his second book, and borrowed a quote from biologist J. Z. Young's *Doubt and Certainty in Science* to explain his approach to the revolution in media and in thought that he called *The Gutenberg Galaxy*:

Physicists do not now say that matter 'is made' of bodies called atoms, protons, electrons and so on. What they have done is to give up the materialist method of describing their observations in terms of something made as by a human process of manufacture, like a cake. The word atom or electron is not used as the name of a piece. It is used as part of the
description of the observations of physicists. It has no meaning except as used by people who know the experiments by which it is revealed.

And, [Young] adds, "it is important to realize that great changes in ways of ordinary human speaking and acting are bound up with the adoption of new instruments.

Had we meditated on such a basic fact as that long ago, we might easily have mastered the nature and effects of all our technologies, instead of being pushed around by them. At any rate, the Gutenberg Galaxy is a prolonged meditation on that theme of J.Z. Young [McLuhan 1962, 15].

Leaving aside for the moment the profound differences in the methodology and make-up of Kuhn and McLuhan, there is a remarkable affinity between their accomplishments. It was McLuhan's next book Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man published in 1964, and 1965 in the U.S. which catapulted his ideas out of the shadows of scholarship and into the glare of the popular arena. Kuhn's appeal was confined to the scholarly arena. The resonance between their work lies in the fact that each attempted to account for radical shifts in worldview, the historically perceptible transformations of basic maps of reality. Where Kuhn concentrated on the question of how scientists change their worldviews, and how science as a collectively constructed enterprise changes course, McLuhan's terrain lay outside the labs and professional knowledge networks. As had Innis before him, McLuhan sought to explain how entire cultures changed course, and how the instruments used by individuals (including the alphabet and printing press) altered the way in which they perceived the world. McLuhan saw that technologies had cultures, and he looked to media as languages which constituted those cultures, and became an invisible environment.

Both thinkers generated controversy, but here they diverge, for Kuhn was to draw back from some of the more radical implications of his work (Hollis and Lukes 1984; Bernstein 1983 ). Not so McLuhan. Each was hailed initially as a significant contributor. Tom Wolfe wrote (1965) that McLuhan sounded like "the most important thinker since Newton, Darwin, Freud, Einstein and Pavlov.." IF HE WAS RIGHT. Kuhn's was the more lasting achievement in terms of the community of scholars, no doubt due in part to his practice of what might be called "normal scholarship". The subversive aspects of his work, such as the implications for "rationality" of the apparent incommensurability of the views of rival scientists pre- and post- paradigm shift, were rejected by him. It was left to others, such as the controversial philosopher of science Paul Feyerabend, to carry on the subversive legacy and the implications of Kuhn's notions for rationality itself.

Whereas Kuhn in the second edition tried to explain his contradictions (such as the multiple uses of the term paradigm), McLuhan made no such concessions (see Levinson 1981 on "McLuhan and Rationality"; for a comparison, see
Bernstein on Feyerabend, who has practiced the same refusal to answer critics as they wished to be answered. McLuhan attracted widespread criticism for his refusal to play by the rules of normal scholarship and answer his critics. One typical response may be found in the opening lines of Carey’s influential 1967 article:

Commenting on the abstruse and controversial scholarship of Harold Innis and Marshall McLuhan is a rather audacious and perhaps impertinent undertaking. It is also a thankless task. McLuhan has often argued that the attempt to analyze, classify and criticize scholarship—the intent of my paper—is not only illegitimate; it also represents the dead hand of an obsolete tradition of scholarship.

McLuhan acted like an oracle; and did not accept that he should have to justify. Who did he think he was, anyway?

I.1. Superior Outsider

Based on the material now available in the Letters, the archives, and accessible oral history (deKerckhove tapes 1983; Theall interview 1989), the first orientational hypothesis is that McLuhan’s unconventional pattern watching was supported to a major degree by his life-long sense of himself as a superior outsider. By birth, by nationality, and later by religion and by unconventional style, McLuhan was an outsider who sustained himself with the sense of his own, and later his adopted religion’s, superiority. Let me draw disparate elements together to support this hypothesis. Most of McLuhan’s life experiences—the major ones—gave him the sense that he was on the outside, not quite looking in, but rather standing outside and taking the larger view. He was born in western Canada to a loving but ineffectual father, and an ambitious mother, bored with domesticity, who spent much of McLuhan’s boyhood years on the road as an actress and recital artist. Money was tight; ideas and a life of the mind were encouraged. There is abundant evidence in the Letters that McLuhan adored his mother. His sense of superiority was nurtured by the family, and brother Maurice confirms the high expectations the family held for Marshall (deKerkhove tapes 1983). Mother’s unusual profession as a monologist also offers some interesting clues to the genesis of McLuhan’s sensitivity to audience, and dramaturgical questions of performance. In his letters, he frequently discusses the finer points of audience, including cultural differences. For example, he advises mother on the reception she could expect to her performances from a British audience, and suggests an appropriate repertoire for such a performance.

There are repeated references to money in McLuhan’s Letters; the purchase of a new suit is an occasion for letters back and forth, as every penny scraped together by the family to support their brilliant son must be well-spent and justified. Raymond Williams has written about the outsider feelings of a boy from a working class background at Cambridge; McLuhan sounds more like an intellectual Horatio
Alger in his letters home, keen to try and make his mark. Appearance was important to this end. McLuhan attended Cambridge on an IODE scholarship—the Imperial Order of the Daughters of the Empire, reminding of his colonial status. As a Canadian at Cambridge, as later in St. Louis, McLuhan felt the outsider, the superior outsider. This could be a strength, as when McLuhan writes of the "receptivity of mind" engendered in him at Cambridge by the experience of living as a foreigner in Europe, a receptivity that he did not feel in his earlier days at the University of Manitoba, and felt he would have missed had he attended a U.S. university.

The decisive step in the confirmation of McLuhan's identity as an outsider however was his conversion to Roman Catholicism. It is important to recall that when McLuhan converted in 1936, it was the fashion in Europe to (as the saying had it in those days) either become Communist or Catholic, in other words to make a commitment. The taped interviews (deKerckhove 1983) with McLuhan's lifelong friend Tom Easterbrook and brother Maurice, indicate that McLuhan's spiritual restlessness was present far back into his youth, and thus predates his Cambridge years. In England McLuhan's admiration grew for many of the converted intellectuals—fellow outsiders with an in—beginning with an enthusiasm for G.K. Chesterton.

His conversion to Catholicism confirmed his identity as a superior outsider because he made a conscious choice as to who was "we" and who was "they". McLuhan, the perpetual outsider, had found a club he considered worthy of his membership, the Roman Catholic church. Writing in 1954, some years after his conversion, McLuhan reveals clearly in "Catholic Humanism and Modern Letters" his sense of the mission of the Catholic intellectual. "I would also draw to your attention the extraordinary example of James Joyce, who, so far as I can judge, was the first to establish his insights into the creative process on the views of Aquinas with regard to perception and cognition. I am not attempting to represent Joyce as a model Catholic" (83). Again McLuhan courted controversy, for many of the themes he chose to study were anathema to the conservative church. Modern literature seemed godless, and McLuhan's attempts to combine the study of modern literature, popular culture and his faith produced a highly charged tension. Donald Theall observes that McLuhan practiced a pietistic Catholicism (Interview 1989). The humanism McLuhan preferred extended to modern literature, but not to liberal values. The security that McLuhan found in the church was a personal one, for converts were regarded with suspicion and continually felt themselves tested and constantly challenged to prove their sincerity (Theall interview 1989).

That his lifelong faith sustained him is supported by repeated references in the Letters to his gravitation toward other Catholics, and toward Catholic institutions. The only universities where he worked were the Catholic colleges—from St. Louis, to Assumption College (now the University of Windsor), to St. Michael's
College, University of Toronto. McLuhan spent a fellowship year at the Jesuit Fordham University in New York City, arranged by a fellow Catholic and admirer, Father John Culkin. His lifelong willingness to act on his faith is especially evident in the letters to another famous Catholic convert of the era, Clare Booth Luce. His discussion of things and people Catholic as "our team" reinforce this impression. The letters to Pierre Elliot Trudeau lend further credence to these basic hypotheses.

This outsider streak, reinforced by his Catholicism, sheds light on his sometimes combative relations with the academy. An exemplary anecdote is the account by Tom Easterbrook, who had become a professor at the University of Toronto's Department of Political Economy, of the meeting he arranged between McLuhan and Harold Innis. As Easterbrook tells the story, after he introduced the two, Innis (who had no love for dogmatism of any stripe) brought up the subject of the Spanish Inquisition, whereupon McLuhan began to defend the church's actions, and to expound on these actions, whereupon all hell broke loose. There was a distinct coolness between the two men after this incident recalled Easterbrook in an interview just before he died (deKerckhove tape 1983).

On the negative side, it may be that this outsider sense reinforced a kind of low grade paranoia, which led McLuhan to draw dark conclusions regarding the "secret societies" to which references are sprinkled throughout the Letters (Theall 1988). In a 1953 letter to Ezra Pound, for example, McLuhan writes:

Last year has been spent going through rituals of secret societies with fine comb. As I said before I'm in a bloody rage at the discovery that the arts and sciences are in the pockets of these societies. It doesn't make me any happier to know that Joyce, Lewis, Eliot, yourself have used these rituals as a basis for art activity [235, and see note].

And he continues in free verse form:

Monopolies of knowledge are intolerable
The use of the arts for sectarian warfare! ugh.
The use of the arts as a technique of salvation!
   as a channel of supernatural grace!
The validity of the rituals is entirely in the cognitive order.

Art is imitation of the process of apprehension,
   clarification of " " " [235]

It is useful to recognize that some of this paranoia was common sense at the time McLuhan came to certain basic conclusions. As brother Maurice tells the story, when the boys were growing up, the prevailing wisdom in largely Protestant Canadian society was that Catholics were feared outsiders, not accepted (deKerckhove tapes 1983). The issue of whether or not a Catholic was suited for high public office was still debated at the time of the Kennedy electoral victory. When asked about the family reaction to McLuhan's conversion Maurice replied that the
family ambitions had long been pinned on McLuhan. In particular Elsie, the mother had desperately wanted one of her boys to as the vernacular had it "be president of Harvard". Marshall's conversion signalled an end to these aspirations. McLuhan's attempts to reassure his worried family indicate that he was well aware of the risk he was taking, and that he considered it genuine. Along with the strength that his faith brought McLuhan, then, it also brought him an awareness that he was part of an out-group, which may have contributed to this low grade paranoia.

This outsider sense was also supported by the fact he was from a country considered marginal by definition. The more marginal, the more superior McLuhan seemed. For his peace of mind, McLuhan appreciated the pace of life in Canada (1977). An outsider to his own country, the relationship was not one of alienation so much as one of large fish in small pond. He identified with those superior outsiders whose work he admired, particularly artists in exile, including Ezra Pound and Wyndham Lewis. He corresponded with both, and knew personally Wyndham Lewis, whom he tried to assist. Lewis, who loathed the small town/small mind Toronto of the fifties (see his Self Condemned) wrote a famous editorial "Enemy" in which he described the morally superior position of the solitary outlaw (which commentators such as Tiessen and Powe have developed). From Lewis, McLuhan drew profound inspiration, and self-consciously modelled certain of his acts after these literary outlaws. Counter Blast (1969), for an illustration, was a publication modelled after the early Twentieth Century Vorticist publication, Blast, put out by Lewis and Pound among others. This pious Catholic, who attended mass daily and was reasonably conventional, even conservative, in his own values makes an interesting if unlikely revolutionary.

1.2. Self-created individual.

Robert Fulford (deKerkhove tapes 1983) described McLuhan as a self-created man. Easterbrook has a telling story about McLuhan's efforts at self-creation (or improvement) which occurred when the two were students at the University of Manitoba. In the midst of a successful endeavour to expand his vocabulary, at one stage McLuhan used unfamiliar words daily much to the discomfort of one plainspoken farmer. Easterbrook found himself apologizing for McLuhan's rude conduct. McLuhan's letters home from Cambridge reflect his conviction that he would be "a somebody," and convey his sense of fashioning himself to be ready.

Again, it is valuable to consider that McLuhan's familiarity with a dramaturgical form (via mother Elsie) meant that he was—as his letters home reveal—cognizant of performance, including his own. However, there was also a darker side to performance, in that McLuhan felt that his agenda should not be totally revealed. Sometimes McLuhan was candid, and sometimes he kept his own counsel. In the Letters he often advises others how to keep themselves to themselves in order to accomplish their own ends.
Two examples must suffice to exemplify this characteristic. Don Theall recalls informing McLuhan of a contract he had signed with the CBC to explain in simple English McLuhan’s report on media which had been submitted to the US National Association of Educational Broadcasters in 1960. McLuhan scolded Theall and warned him that it was unwise to give too much away. An intriguing example from the Letters reviews McLuhan’s decision not to take a post at “Catholic University” in Washington because he did not want that title to appear under his name when he wrote. He wanted to get his message across as an author, but he did not want to alarm the unsuspecting by being too obvious about his own hidden agenda, which—particularly in the candid and lucid “Catholic Humanism and Modern Letters”—is quite explicit.

Despite this outsider sense of self McLuhan was a gregarious and often charming character. He liked to be in the limelight, and in concert with his strong and supportive American wife, the former actress Corinne, was determined that his talents be recognized. Consequently, during the sixties he arranged for professional publicity. These promotional activities were disdained by the members of the academy, with whom he found himself frequently at odds.

In a letter from the Archives, dated February 1966, McLuhan’s U.S. public relations consultant Howard Gossage expressed his apprehensions that McLuhan may be overdoing his public appearances. Writes Gossage, “Robert Graves, in his book, Occupation Writer, says this: "I have been haunted since school days by Daudet’s macabre story of the man with the gold brain—of which he recklessly scraped away bits for his greedy dependents until he died a hollow-skulled imbecile, gold dust and blood under his fingernails.”

II.3. Pattern watcher.

McLuhan’s favourite image for pattern watching was that of Poe’s man in the maelstrom, who studied the operations (patterns) of the vortex in order to avoid drowning. Reading popular culture as a source of patterns, which McLuhan pursued in Mechanical Bride has its formal roots in his exposure to the beginnings of the New Criticism (and the reader response movement) in contact with the Leavises and a course taught by Richards on Philosophy of Rhetoric at Cambridge (see Letters 1988: 50,58,67,93). From the beginning, he is sceptical on the particulars of Richards’ method of reader response (50). McLuhan spoke of the influence of the methods of experimental medicine, citing the work of medical historian Claude Bernard, as seminal (Theall 1974, and Kroker 1984). His paradoxical sense of causality (the effect is the cause) he attributes both to experimental medicine, and to Thomas Aquinas (McLuhan and Nevitt 1973).

McLuhan was a hidden moralist, which, as will become evident in the next section, also determined the prose style he chose.
II.4. Educator/catalyst.

McLuhan chose the career route of the doctor as teacher. The Letters begin early to reflect his sense of himself as educator, as in this one from April 12, 1936:

> Occasionally I catch an oblique glimpse or illumination of Canadians, or some vivid memory is aroused and, I must confess, that at such times my heart sinks at the task awaiting the educator... My life in Canada will be a continual discontent. My task as a teacher will be to shake others from their complacency—how is it possible to contemplate the products of English life (ie. Literature) without criticising our own sterility.. [83].

When viewed as educator, for whom discovery was more important than justification (in Popper’s sense), much about McLuhan can be understood. Like a performer, his aim was to engender or produce an effect in his audience, like lightning igniting a spark. Biographically, the dramaturgical sensibility is evident in this hypothesis. For McLuhan, this had much to do with his deep appreciation of the theory of cognitive intellect put forward by Aquinas (as Theall and Kroker have noted). As educator he sought a therapeutic effect, like shock treatment. His interest in popular culture he said was in order to reach (so as to teach) his North American students. The role of educator suited McLuhan and provided an outlet for his restless curiosity, playful hamming, and intense need for both novelty and an audience.

Gathering together these threads of argument may shed light on why the hidden moralist would choose the prose style of Menippean satire, or the non-moral satire. Menippean satire is a subgenre of satire, which combines verse or quotation and prose, and mixes humour and seriousness (Coffey 1976). A useful example would be Swift’s *Gulliver’s Travels*, where the satire conceals the moral message. It is significant in this context to see how far back McLuhan’s experimentation with this form extends. In a 1951 letter to Ezra Pound, McLuhan writes of *Mechanical Bride*:

> Life Jan 1/51 War assets issue. Pin-up girls featured as major asset. I have tried, in forthcoming (March) *Mechanical Bride* to devise a technique for elucidating this scene. It Can’t be satirized. Trouble with duffers like George Orwell is that they satirize something that happened 50 yrs ago as a threat of the future! Effect is narcotic(219).

Doubtless McLuhan was influenced by the first chapter of Wyndham Lewis’- *Men Without Art* (1934) which is entitled "The Greatest Satire is Non-Moral", an allusion that would not require spelling out in this letter.

It was after *Bride* that McLuhan came under the influence of Innis. (Heyer 1988). Stylistically, Innis showed him a way to take his literary methods which were largely distilled from Joyce and the Symbolist poets and his Menippean satire
genre, mix with humour and package it for a wider audience. Thus Gutenberg Galaxy, a pastiche of quotes and citations, emerged as a literary original equivalent to the social science original of Innis. Because of his political economy background, Innis used metaphors of monopoly and staples, while McLuhan’s own background enabled him to see media, and technologies as languages with their own grammars (see "General Introduction to the Languages and Grammars of the Media", in Report on Project 69, 1960). Thus the Sapir Whorf hypothesis, whereby language constitutes worldview, is filtered through Innis’ bias of communication, and the media of communications become extensions of the human senses.

How does satire become probe? The probe is a living, an oral, an educator’s approach. If most successful social scientific schools are based on a shared methodological innovation as Edward Tiryakian has argued (1979), then he may have discovered one self-fulfilling prophecy about McLuhan’s lack of institutional success. His methods were literary, situational, and defied easy replication.

Let us return to the synoptic mode to continue this examination of McLuhan’s intentions, turning to an enlightening set of letters. Recall that McLuhan’s style in these Letters is oral, he dictated to his secretary Margaret Stewart while seated or lying prone in his office at the coach house near St. Michael’s College at the University of Toronto. McLuhan may have read these letters, but with varying degrees of care.

In two letters dated July 31st, and August 1st, 1974 McLuhan addresses himself to American historian Marshall Fishwick, a fellow Roman Catholic whom McLuhan had known since 1966. The correspondence concerns an article sent by Fishwick to McLuhan, and authored by Everette Dennis (from the April issue of Mass Communications Review, published by the Mass Communications and Society Division of the Association for Education in Journalism at Temple University in Philadelphia: the communications establishment). The July letter is three paragraphs long. At the beginning I will slightly paraphrase.

What’s all this guff...I am a full time academic who has very little leisure for writing, but I took four years to do The Executive as Dropout. ... The academic coverage is only beginning for my stuff. Remember, I have the only communication theory of transformation - all the other theories are theories of transportation only [1987,505].

The letter continues into the third paragraph:

Dennis [the author of the offending article] apparently imagines that the media are my primary concern. This is far from being the case. One major misunderstanding concerns my "style" which happens to be a very good style for getting attention. As for getting understanding, that depends entirely upon the reader. The user is always the content, and the user is often very evasive, or very stupid [ibid.,505].
In the next sentence, McLuhan repeats his signature statement regarding the context for understanding his own work: "Nobody could pretend serious interest in my work who was not completely familiar with all of the works of James Joyce and the French Symbolists." In the bitter sentence which follows, he informs the friendly Fishwick that the "Latin world" is more interested in him than is the "Wasp world" (506). McLuhan, the outsider, sees himself once again misunderstood.

The next letter, extending to four paragraphs, is dated the following day. In it, McLuhan encloses unspecified materials, which he urges Fishwick to use in composing a reply to Dennis. Of Dennis, McLuhan observes, "He seems to have the usual anti-McLuhan animus that characterizes the schools of communication. That is, they are all information—theory people, as people."

Far from disavowing the Mechanical Bride of 1951, as he seemed to do on an earlier occasion, McLuhan warms to his argument and says in the second paragraph of his letter:

Why did Dennis choose to ignore the Mechanical Bride? Or the fact that I was a well-known literary critic long before that? Why does he choose to ignore that my work is essentially satirical and non-moral, cf., the greatest satire is non-moral [506].

On this limited basis, several observations can be extracted. The concern here is not yet with ferreting out some absolute or even journalistic "truth" of these statements, but rather with McLuhan's sense of his own intentions and the conventions within which and against which he worked.

III.5. Literature professor turns to interdisciplinary media study.

In disciplinary terms, McLuhan saw himself operating within the tradition of literary criticism. This is his base, his ground, his point of departure. Since he is not a social scientist, therefore, to examine McLuhan's work on the merits of his social science is to risk missing his point. As we engage more completely with his communications argument, of course, it becomes clear that this is not sufficient, for McLuhan criticizes others for their inadequate social science, inadequate that is to the task of understanding media. Take for example, McLuhan's criticism in Understanding Media of two giants of the U.S. communications establishment. Of an experiment attempted by Wilbur Schramm on the impact of TV when newly introduced in a remote area writes McLuhan:

Since he had made no study of the peculiar nature of the TV image, his tests were of "content" preferences, viewing time, and vocabulary counts. In a word, his approach to the problem was a literary one, albeit unconsciously so. Consequently, he had nothing to report. ..Program and "content" analysis offer no clues to the magic of these media or to their subliminal charge. [19-20].
In his chapter "Radio as the Tribal Drum", McLuhan criticizes Lazarsfeld in similar fashion. "The inability of literate people to grasp the language and message of the media as such is involuntarily conveyed by the comments of sociologist Paul Lazarsfeld in discussing the effects of radio" [and he quotes Lazarsfeld on Hitler and radio, and then resumes] "Professor Lazarsfeld's helpless unawareness of the nature and effects of radio is not a personal defect, but a universally shared ineptitude" (297-298). McLuhan the literary critic turned media critic skewers the leading lights in U.S. communications, accusing them of being too literate, and for an intellectual, worse, of being unconsciously too literate. The animus seems to work both ways.

If McLuhan is to be judged on his own claims, then what he claims to be doing is using the tools of a literary critic to educate and raise consciousness. It is apparent that McLuhan expects a high standard of literate behaviour when his own work is under consideration. He uses the techniques of Mallarme and the Symbolist poets, like Poe's man in the maelstrom who studies the action of the maelstrom without panic or moral interpretation, and finds a way out by diagnosing the pattern.

McLuhan called his work Menippean satire; but his readers, the audience who took up his work for the most part had not read Mallarme, nor Joyce. McLuhan's work falls into a genre of speculative prose, where he joins such authors as Daniel Bell The Coming of Post Industrial Society: A venture in Social Forecasting (1973) and Alvin Toffler Third Wave (1980). Divorced from the context in which McLuhan had constructed his ideas, where he worked in Menippean satire, the context for appreciation of his work in the 1960's was the widespread experience of change, and the many attempts to comprehend it. For McLuhan, success at this genre was the work of an artist, and he cited Wyndham Lewis's observation: "The artist is engaged in writing a detailed history of the future because he is the only person who lives in the present" (1969).

Within this context, how did McLuhan see himself and the rise and fall of his public persona? Back to the letter to Fishwick, a tense McLuhan tells the story of what happened in the sixties from his perspective, and recounts "McLuhan's" own rise and fall as a media star.

Apropos my sudden prominence in the 60's, it happened with the dropout TV generation who were happy to discover the rage which my stuff produced in the academic bosom and to associate themselves with me on that account. Now that the TV generation is squaring up again, they no longer feel the same satisfaction in zapping the establishment via McLuhan. McLuhan continues to engender academic rage while the TV kids are running for cover [506].
McLuhan now switches from speaking of himself in the third person as a kind of icon back to the first person with which he began this paragraph. As always, he remains the perpetual outsider, a man who feels misunderstood:

The reason that I am admired in Paris and in some of the Latin countries is that my approach is rightly regarded as "structuralist". I have acquired that approach through Joyce and the Symbolists and used it in Mechanical Bride. Nobody except myself in the media field has ventured to use the structuralist or "existential" approach. It is a highbrow approach, and the schools of communication are uniformly hardware and flatfoot in their training and activities [506].

McLuhan’s one sentence last paragraph asks for Fishwick’s advice on a response to the article, in these terms: "Please tell me what you think should be done in order to make the best possible use of this beach-head."

The military metaphor here employed in the term beach—head is consistent with the sense projected by McLuhan of a man besieged by those whom he fears would do harm to his work and reputation. This impression is reinforced by the combative opening quote on the previous day’s letter, from Chairman Mao Tse Tung "I hold that it is bad as far as we are concerned if a person, a political party, an army or a school is not attacked by the enemy, for in that case it would definitely mean that we have sunk to the level of the enemy" (505). The resonance may be with Wyndham Lewis’ "enemy", but the message fits a Roman Catholic perspective just as neatly.

Institutionally, McLuhan contributed to the growth of interdisciplinary studies in a variety of ways. His interdisciplinary approach was evident in the diverse backgrounds of those invited to be part of the Seminars on Communications and Culture 1953-55 at the University of Toronto, funded by the Ford Foundation, and McLuhan’s first publicly-recognized achievement. It was also the time of the launch of the journal Explorations, 1953-59, chiefly edited by anthropologist and seminar member Edmund Carpenter, in which small publication McLuhan realized an ambition he had nurtured from his St. Louis days, when he made the decision to take a post at Assumption College in Windsor as part of an abortive attempt at collaboration with Wyndham Lewis. Carpenter was invited along to Fordham University when McLuhan was awarded a fellowship year. The Ford Foundation grant in 1953 stimulated the collaboration and cross-fertilization known as The Toronto School of Communication. In his 1971 book on McLuhan, The Medium is the Rear-View Mirror, Donald Theall appended a speculative note on "The Influence of the Canadian University Milieu on McLuhan." Theall carries on some of this important work in a 1981 article, and much remains to be done. The legacy of McLuhan in Canadian communication studies is equally complex. As may be seen in the frequently fragile position of certain interdisciplinary faculties, there were status and legitimacy problems for the newcomers. This line of research
retrieves the fact that McLuhan's interdisciplinary Centre for Culture and Technology, created in 1963 to keep McLuhan in Canada, in the face of U.S. offers, could not grant independent degrees, and thus was largely dependent on outside faculties. This minor example serves to indicate McLuhan's cognizance of the interdisciplinary issue within the constraints of his surroundings, as does this excerpt from a letter to former University of Toronto president and McLuhan's great friend, Claude Bissell:

Wish you were here to discuss the matter of mounting a program for degrees in communications. It has come up lately as one means to recapture undergrads from the social-science areas, on the one hand, and on the other hand to bring larger numbers of graduate students into the university. There is a way whereby without altering courses or instructors' activities, all existing programs can be used as communication credits...[the student] would have to develop projects which brought his various elected subjects into rapport and interplay. Chemistry and Latin or Greek could be as easily related as mathematics and physics and poetry...

McGill already has a Ph.D. in communications under the auspices of the English Department. They have some specific offerings for the M.A. but only projects and dissertations for the Ph.D. You see, most American universities have a Ph.D. in communication which is almost entirely slanted toward hardware expertise [Letters 476. May 10, 1973].

How significant was McLuhan's contribution to interdisciplinary studies? In a revealing memo to Innis, McLuhan calls for an interdisciplinary approach to unite political economy and the humanities, and writes, "It seems obvious to me that Bloor St. [referring to the economics building, where Innis had his office] is the one point in this University where one might establish a focus of the arts and sciences. And the organizing concept would naturally be 'Communication Theory and practice' "(Letters 223, March 1951). From the outset the stated objective for the journal Explorations was to bridge the social sciences and the humanities (Letters: 246). For this task, collaboration with social scientists was essential—such as Edmund Carpenter, the editor of Explorations, and the psychologist Carl Williams. It is also notable that McLuhan's programmatic letter to Innis (220-223) was apparently circulated by Innis and features his handwritten notation "Memorandum on Humanities" (ibid.note 1). (Fekete makes this point, albeit for different reasons 1982, 53). This line of research takes the assessment of McLuhan into his role as one of the catalysts for an interdisciplinary approach to communications.

III.6. Emergence of communications as an "interdiscipline".

McLuhan was at work at a time that has been called a "ferment in the field" of communications—he was a humanities scholar, recognized as promising in
accomplishments. His Ph.D. thesis had circulated in the US, giving him a certain reputation among American literary scholars. He was considered part of the New Criticism. (Theall interview 1989).

How did he become a foundational figure in the modern interdisciplinary approach to communications (Heyer 1988)? In rough sketch, the historical roots of North American communications scholarship reach back earlier in the century, and coincide with the professionalization of the social science tradition (Robinson 1987). Synopsizing drastically, by the 1950’s and accelerating into the 1960’s, the consensus of those studying communications from the social sciences had fragmented (Giddens 1987). One persistent problem for those who studied human communications, especially mass communications, was that most of the research took a linear, quantitative and behaviorist approach to the subject of communication. Mead’s social self was all-but-forgotten, and the question of interpretation, and of the making of meaning in groups, had been largely abandoned by the social sciences, although there were exceptions such as Geertz. Thus it seems no accident that it is scholars from the humanities who have effected a challenge to the social scientific study of communications. A similar pattern is evident in Britain, where the work of literary critics such as Raymond Williams and Richard Hoggart stimulated a fresh (if neoMarxist) approach (Garnham 1983).

McLuhan was a North American pioneer in a similar (if nonMarxist) vein. As we saw above, in his own immodest assessment, McLuhan’s contribution to the field was a theory of transformation, while Lazarsfeld, Schramm and the others he considered of the establishment, offered theories of transportation. Much of the violent reaction of the academy can be accounted for, I speculate, on the basis of the fact that this literary professor from a marginal country deemed himself competent to propound alternative theories of communication; and to lacerate the US establishment for the "flatfooted" approach taken. His religious orientation was not so congenial to the modern temper as was the neoMarxism of his British colleagues.

McLuhan was charming, yet he also seems to have driven off potential rivals who might have been successors. He was noted however as a collaborator.

Further research is underway into McLuhan’s impact on the other levels of discourse: the worlds of policy-making, and popular art and culture. Although he did not found a school, and may have been too much the monologist to successfully do so, he had an major impact on the institutional development of communications as a scholarly discipline in Canada, some of it inhibiting in nature. One might speculate for instance as to why the University of Toronto does not have a communications department. Many of the people he influenced, went on to play roles at university or media organizations, such as innovative broadcaster Patrick
Watson and Donald Theall who founded the communications department at McGill (de Kerckhove tapes 1983).

Finally clues based on biography intrude into any reassessment: the unmentionables of academic life, money and self-promotion. McLuhan, with a sizeable family, lovely home, and meager professor’s salary from the University of Toronto, wanted to make money. He was a man in search of an audience. These two unmentionables receive little published attention in scholarship, yet their presence in gossip, surely an academic staple difficult to quantify, obviously had an impact on the actions taken by and the perception of McLuhan.

Critics

Before concluding, let me now position this approach in relation to certain sustained and scholarly commentaries, mainly Canadian, which have appeared on McLuhan post-1980.

It is, however, impossible to present even a partial list without at least mentioning James Carey. Carey wrote the first major article establishing for mainstream US communications scholars the existence of the Canadian communications connection—Innis and McLuhan (1967). Carey’s 1970 assessment (with Quirk) stands as the most cited (in my reading, and see Slack 1984 for continuing relevance) negative assessment of McLuhan. Points made in the later article generalize from criticism contained in Carey’s 1967 article so let it be text for these comments. Here in summary are the three major charges laid against McLuhan. First, he did not answer his critics, seeming to make a mockery of scholarship; second, he was a simple technological determinist; and finally he deliberately took no moral stance.

It is my view that one of Carey’s central contentions about McLuhan is misleading and has in fact led to a misrepresentation of McLuhan’s works. Carey’s method is to draw a theoretical analogy to the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis that (simply stated) language determines perception and thought (16;18). Clearly there is a parallel between this work and McLuhan’s approach - and an intellectual connection through the work of Hall (Heyer, 232). But there are significant points left out by this refutation by analogy, whereby Carey draws the analogy that McLuhan’s work resembles Sapir-Whorf, refutes Sapir-Whorf, and claims that this goes a major distance toward demolishing McLuhan. Hold on a minute. Taking Gutenberg Galaxy as text for McLuhan (while noting that Carey admitted excluding "parts of" Galaxy from his critique) we see that McLuhan is preoccupied with analyzing historical change—a vastly different undertaking from that of Sapir-Whorf. Furthermore, it seems misleading to confute Sapir-Whorf’s concern with the connections between language structures and world view with McLuhan’s more dynamic inquiry into the connections between human-designed tools and
media, their changes over history, and the changing and differential impacts of such media. As we noted at the outset, McLuhan states that *Gutenberg Galaxy* is a prolonged meditation on Young's notion that "great changes in ways of ordinary human speaking and acting are bound up with the adoption of new instruments." The nature and scope of the inquiries of McLuhan on the one hand and Sapir Whorf on the other seem complementary, but surely not identical. If anything, McLuhan's later work goes further in the direction of analyzing the effects of media as sensory extensions which form environments that interactively process the human sensorium.

It would seem reductive to classify McLuhan's probing search for the keys to the openings and closings of the doors of perception as merely an extension of a flawed theory of language (Sapir-Whorf) and an obsolete view of mind (24). There are other sourcepoints for McLuhan's ideas—later Carey tries again with Mumford,—that might more usefully be pursued should it be necessary to assess McLuhan by way of theoretical analogy to those whose ideas he could be said to have extended. The charge of technological determinism stuck, however. In clearing out Carey's misconstrual of McLuhan's project this essay will leave important questions for the future, such as the notion that he was a simple technological determinist. This notion seems untenable within the context of the entire oeuvre, however. Relevant to this line of research is consideration of the evolution of McLuhan's ideas. Gronbeck goes some distance in establishing the fact that McLuhan continued to develop his views long after Carey's dismissal had taken hold (1981).

It is my opinion that Carey's superior writing style—elegant, clear and comprehensible—in contrast to the less accessible styles of Innis and McLuhan has served as a filter to their work. In the end, Carey's project is larger than simply one of interpretation. Carey had a talent for translating (with his own accent) the ideas of others, and later in his career introduced many American scholars to "cultural studies." Perhaps Carey found it necessary for rhetorical purposes, and perhaps a hidden moral agenda of his own, to dethrone McLuhan in order to resurrect Innis to achieve his task, Carey uses McLuhan as a foil—to restore Innis, Carey must dethrone McLuhan.

Carey's project is animated by his admitted "aversion to much of what McLuhan represents" (26). Carey's first objection is that McLuhan's unorthodox approach makes him very hard to criticize (Carey:5,35). More to the point (since Carey rises above the first objection nicely) he objects to McLuhan's "quality of moral imagination" which in simplified form means his lack of a moral stance. This quality is in sharp contrast to Innis' definitive concern with the values of civilization. Suffice for now to note that the Kenneth Burke-influenced Roman Catholic scholar Carey's aversion to McLuhan's perceived amoralism focuses the
academic reaction against McLuhan, and alas discourages direct reading of his work.

This criticism of Carey also touches on the recent and otherwise valuable work of Daniel Czitrom, for Czitrom repeats and reproduces the flawed assumptions in Carey. In addition, Czitrom’s work indicates the need for more grounded American scholarship on McLuhan and the meaning of communications. It is inaccurate to say (as he does p. 147) that McLuhan came to communication studies late in his career. Czitrom’s observation on Innis and McLuhan that "As Canadians, both men were less constrained by the behavioral tradition of communication studies dominant in the United States" (147) requires further explication.

Briefly let me distinguish this essay’s argument from three Canadian critical contributions. They are: John Fekete’s 1982 article on McLuhan, Arthur Kroker’s 1984 book on Innis/McLuhan/Grant, and Paul Heyer’s 1988 Communications and History with chapters on McLuhan, Innis and Foucault among others.

Kroker’s stimulating and provocative meditation on technology and the making of the Canadian mind deserves to be read, in its entirety. Writing before the archival materials became available, however, Kroker’s version of McLuhan seems to me off the mark in one fundamental respect. I share his view that McLuhan’s Catholicism is more significant than commentators prior to Kroker (himself an ex-priest) have recognized, with the exception of Theall. For example, Letters"...I am a Thomist for whom the sensory order resonates with the divine Logos." (1969, 368.)

But I cannot accept his typification of McLuhan as the representative of the liberal humanist position on technology in the Canadian discourse. (If this be true, then we are in more trouble than I suspected.) When Kroker says that "...McLuhan expressed that which is most insightful in the liberal side of the Canadian imagination" (54) in contrast to George Grant and contrasts the Catholic humanism against the dead hand of Protestantism, possibly his rhetoric is getting away from him. Innis would seem to qualify as a liberal and a humanist, over McLuhan for five simple reasons. 1. his quality of moral imagination and 2. reverence for the classical balance of Greece, 3. plea for time and oral tradition, and 4. relentless dedication to scholarship and 5. dedication to liberal causes such as free speech. Or perhaps Kroker would not wish to accord such classical meaning to the term liberal, or humanist.

McLuhan reveals some of his private values when he approvingly cites Wyndham Lewis as a source for the view that feminism and homosexuality are twins (Letters 213), or takes negative views of women and especially of women’s rights movements, or writes in 1972 to Ashley Montagu "No Wasp can ever form a natural special relation with a black" (451) These values are inconsistent with
liberal humanism. I am not persuaded by Kroker’s conclusion (78) that "McLuhan was the last and best exponent of the liberal imagination in Canadian letters." On the basis of the material I have seen McLuhan is worth reassessment, but he is neither the last, nor the best exponent of the liberal imagination in Canada. Even Northrop Frye might be a more suitable candidate for this position and the fact that he did not address technology with the force of the thinkers treated by Kroker might retrieve a productive line of research into the failure of the liberal imagination. With great respect the evidence would not seem to endorse Kroker’s version of McLuhan.

The configuration that I consider most appropriate for a reassessment of McLuhan lies somewhere between John Fekete and Paul Heyer. In his 1982 article on McLuhan, Fekete anticipates many of the points that need to be made on questions of McLuhan in relation to (what Innis called) the academic monopolies of knowledge, and McLuhan’s relevance to a reconsideration of the bridging of the humanities and social sciences. I share this stance, and have argued above for the utility of a comparison to master pattern-watcher Kuhn and the work he has inspired, and for the necessity of a biographically grounded and culturally sensitive starting point for McLuhan. Fekete approaches the question primarily from the literary/culturalist side of the disciplinary divide, and thus continues the argument from his opus The Critical Twilight. It is necessary to add a social scientifically informed perspective to assess McLuhan as a scholar who evolved an interdisciplinary position on communications during his career. The thrust of this argument is that it is necessary to take a larger view of McLuhan’s contribution, which entails placing him in an interdisciplinary context and attending to his departure from the critical literary tradition, not in terms of the end of a line of thought, but in terms of a point of departure for the interdisciplinary of communications.

Paul Heyer supplies some of the grounded historical and social scientifically honed perspective which complements Fekete’s more literary approach (Heyer 1988). His historical project supplies valuable background and context for the recent emergence of communications as a discipline. The quarrel with Heyer would be that he appears to express an animus toward McLuhan that does not seem borne out in the evidence he presents (eg. 202, 215). The comments above concerning the problems of Carey apply to Heyer with equal force (214). Take for example, on p. 225: (Grudgingly) "to make a comparison with Innis on orality, McLuhan uses a wider range of examples than his predecessor, who relied mostly on the early Greek experience for his generalizations. But while Innis explored the full social ramifications of orality, McLuhan confines his emphasis to its acoustic (aural) properties and psychological implications." Shades of Carey! Heyer who is otherwise sensitive on this point has already informed us that Innis did not take into account the status of women or inequalities of wealth; so much for the "full
social ramifications." McLuhan is not a social scientist, and arguably is exploring another dimension of effects: on consciousness and sensory organization. There is a resigned tone to Heyer’s treatment of McLuhan which culminates in this concluding thought: "Does McLuhan then belong in the select company of scholars such as Childe, Mumford, and Innis, who have studied key aspects of the history of Civilization? Absolutely. Such a pantheon should have a clown prince". (140) Such a dismissive attitude undercuts Heyer’s otherwise important achievement.

Reassessment

This essay presents the interpretive hypotheses as a way to make a beginning on a reassessment of McLuhan. In assessment, McLuhan is accorded the role of catalyst in the emergent "interdiscipline" of communications. This claim is based first on McLuhan’s writings and his own words about how his approach differed from the orthodoxy of the fifties and early sixties, namely that he had a theory of transformation while the U.S. communications establishment offered linear theories of transportation. It is not hard to find the kernal of truth in this overstated observation. The second ground is his sustained desire to break down disciplinary barriers, evident in the Letters, the Toronto School of Communications period, the journal Explorations, his many collaborations, and more formally in his memo to Innis calling for an interdisciplinary approach to communications. He is further claimed as one of the foundational figures for the subfield of communications/history (Carey 1967; Heyer 1988). In Canada the conjuncture of Innis and McLuhan gives birth to a modern disciplinary subfield, communications/history.

The essay itself runs a certain risk of misinterpretation. McLuhan’s contributions have been dismissed for the wrong reasons, and I consider that the interpretive hypotheses permit the intellectual historian to recover some of McLuhan’s intentions, the conventions within which he worked, and the disciplinary context so that it is possible to account for the reaction of the academy to his work. This work is clearly preliminary, concentrating in the main on recovering intentions, and speculates programatically in the direction of the research currently under way into the institutional context within which McLuhan turned from disciplinary orientation within literary criticism, and the teaching of English literature, to a foundational role in the interdiscipline of communications and the arena of public celebrity. Rough as they are, these hypotheses indicate lines of future research.

Situating McLuhan within the disciplinary ferment that characterized the period in which his major creative work appeared (1950’s and 1960’s: Mechanical Bride; Gutenberg Galaxy; Understanding Media) arguably permits the needed reassessment to take place in terms of the institutional (and disciplinary) context, while not losing sight of the singular figure central to the argument nor the culture
which grounded his figure. Several vistas emerge for further investigation once the preliminary direction is established by the interpretive hypotheses.

The emergence of communications as a tradition, drawing on social sciences and the humanities reflects the impulse to place questions of meaning and interpretation at the centre of inquiry; Charles Taylor has summarized the pressures shaping the social sciences as a whole in his essay "Interpretation and the Sciences of Man". Taylor concludes that conventional notions of rationality and the authority of natural science come into question when interpretation becomes central to social science. This is the larger backdrop for this reassessment of McLuhan, raised here briefly through the comparison with Thomas Kuhn, and suggested comparison with Paul Feyerabend.

McLuhan worked at a time of ferment, both within the culture at large and within the academy. It became increasingly evident throughout the 1960's that the question of making meaning had been largely abandoned by orthodox social scientists in the study of communications. Eventually, in the 1970's, part of this vacuum was filled for North American studies (as so often in the past) by imported ideas from Europe, successive waves of cultural studies and various French structuralisms, and post-structuralisms. It is possible to treat McLuhan as an indigenous precursor for some of these developments.

Like a small trading nation, Canadians have protected ourselves by looking outward, and grasping world patterns, like McLuhan, like Innis, like Grant. McLuhan did not typify Canadians, he was a consistent outsider even to his own country, particularly if we go by these traits of Canadian intellectuals noted by historian A. B. McKillop: "if the intellectual historian in Canada looks for original thought he will find precious little. But having faced this fact, he should not let it serve as an excuse for ignoring the thought that did exist" (in Horn 1987, E12). Even when Canada nurtures an original, we are not necessarily maîtres chez nous, not yet masters of the disciplinary manoeuvres. Academic reputations are rarely made in Canada, legitimacy lies beyond the borders. Scholarly success is not simply a question of having a good idea, it is also a matter of authority, of legitimacy, of gaining admittance from the gate-keepers of the academic disciplines, which means acceptance in the US or even in Britain. Thus, for example, James Carey's opinion on McLuhan, or Raymond Williams' for that matter, may carry more weight in Canada and certainly may be more widely known than McLuhan's actual text.

In the absence of reassessment, the extensions of McLuhan proceed into the present but without the connecting thread of inclusive (not partial, not trivializing) historical awareness which would point back to his work. Dell Hymes captured the consequences of this disciplinary neglect, in his comment on the need for a critical history in linguistic anthropology: "to the degree that we have lacked an
active knowledge of the history of our field, we have been limited by lack of some of the perspectives that have not been transmitted to us, and by the partialness of some of those that have. A critical history can help us to regain the one and transcend the other" (Jones 1983: 450).

The lines of research opened up by these interpretive hypotheses run counter to the current orthodox dismissal of McLuhan’s work and significance. In the end he emerges as analogically speaking sharing some of the characteristics of lightning: an abundance of heat and light, a catalyst without a system.

NOTES

1. Several submissions must here stand for the many observed: DeMott’s essay "Against McLuhan" (1966) reprinted in Mass Media and Mass Man (Casty ed.) develops the McLuhanacy refrain; the two editions of Rosenberg and White’s Mass Culture (1957)—which features McLuhan’s work—and Mass Culture Revisited (1971)—which does not but features an introduction by Lazarsfeld—develops the anti McLuhan animus. White writes: "Many, like Marshall McLuhan and his followers, have managed to swallow the nausea they once felt. .. After years of courtship, and growing but unrequited love, McLuhan married the Mechanical Bride whose every gesture used to repel him." Less polemically, Slack quotes an article by James Carey from 1970 to buttress her case that McLuhan should be dismissed as a simple technological determinist. (in Communication Technologies and Society: Conceptions of Causality and the Politics of Technological Intervention (1984: 56-58).

2. There is such a wealth of popular play on McLuhan’s work that it is almost invisible, like an environment. This headline from Business Week, March 20, 1989, is representative: "Giant steps toward the global village - or an ego trip?" This commentary by Judith Dobrzynski illustrates a further point that these conceptual influences from McLuhan are not simply accepted at face value.

3. The author thanks the SSHRC, Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada for financial assistance. Thanks (and no blame) to G.J. Robinson, Paul Heyer, Donald Theall (for comments on an earlier draft), David Crowley, Derrick DeKerckhove, and William Kuhns. This essay does not cover Laws of Media (1988 with Eric McLuhan), nor the biography by Philip Marchand (forthcoming at time of writing).

4. The material behind this simple set of three binary pairs is vast. The interpretive hypotheses serve as an organizing device, and are intended to assist the reader in the more labyrinthine narrative which follows. I would like to acknowledge again the importance of the tapes provided by deKerckhove (1983) which were immensely valuable in double checking these materials.
A lengthy and valuable oral history documentation interview was also taped with Donald Theall (one of McLuhan’s first University of Toronto graduate students).

5. Havelock, in *The Muse Learns to Write* similarly notes the extraordinary confluence of pattern watcher books to appear in the 1962 - 63 period (24-33). The addition of Kuhn changes the scale of the discussion. Regrettably I have not in this essay pursued the placement of McLuhan (for reassessment purposes) where arguably he belongs: in the contemporary post-Kuhn debate on rationality, interpretation and science. Bernstein (1983) offers a major treatment of these issues in *Beyond Objectivism and Relativism*.

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